

diaspora they are often able to exercise work skills that had no scope at home. Indeed, many show the capacity of "frontier" women to run a home, do a job, and master strange languages, laws and officials. To see camp women as 'only' housewives would be to miss their flexibility and adventurousness.

Most Chatila girls will marry a *shabb* from this camp or another, whose chance

of employment or migration is equally restricted. Keeping home in a camp means a daily struggle with dirt from dusty or muddy streets; fetching water from distant street taps; patching up thin walls and leaky roofs; washing clothes every other day for families of eight or more; baking bread in temperatures of 80°F; and coping with the many sicknesses that arise from leaking sewers, street dirt, protein-

low diets and poor habitat. This is the daily life of camp housewives in normal times. But since mid-1985 there have been Amal attacks and sieges, leading to a degree of destruction and displacement that makes the hardships of post-'82 invasion days like heaven.

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# The Frozen Siege of Chatila

**C**hatila lies in ruins, exactly as it was on 6 April when a food convoy finally got in. UNRWA has employed youths to clear the main alleys of rubble; a few repairs have been carried out, here a roof, there a pipe; shops are slowly replenishing their stocks. But such signs of normalization are minimal, a reflection of a tangle of unresolved issues, between Palestinians and Lebanese, between the PLO and Damascus. While the mood in the camp is one of cautious optimism — Amal is no longer seen as a serious threat — the danger of internal splits still lurks in spite of the Algiers PNC; and the pressures towards migration generated by insecurity and unemployment are feared by some as much as outright attack.

At the only permitted entry to the camp, on Sabra Street, the road is cordoned off by metal railings, with a Syrian soldier controlling the small gap through which everyone must pass. Only metres away Amal's main local office remains open and its men in civilian clothes watch all who enter or leave the camp. Beyond the roadblock, crowds of Chatila men idle among the ruins; they are forbidden to leave the camp. Nor is any adult male permitted to enter. Though a choker on normalization, the Syrian decree has reduced the danger of Amal attacks on Palestinians outside the camp.

Another visible sign that the siege is only frozen are the Sixth Brigade sentries, still posted around the camp. Further off, Amal sniper/observation posts remain manned. The only way to reach

the inner camp is through smaller alleys of new routes cut through house walls. Though most of the trenches that were the keypoint of Chatila's defensive system have been loosely filled in, the shelters dug under the bases during the siege are still there. "This is the route where they carried the wounded," says a woman whose devastated home stands next to one of the bases. She points to a path leading up from a damp-looking cave where bits of torn mattress and planks still lie on the ground. Situated at the southwest corner of the camp, this quarter is one of the hardest hit. House repairs aren't even on the agenda, partly because vehicles cannot enter the camp, but more basically because the decision to rebuild is a political one, an issue linked to the villages east of Sidon, the Arafat come-back, the politicians' status in Lebanon, and Syria's Lebanon policies.

On the periphery of the camp destruction is almost total. Further in, most floors above ground level had been blasted away to give the attackers an unobstructed aim, but ground floors are still largely habitable. Some families whose homes have been destroyed, and who can afford to rent outside, have left the camp, especially if they have children in school or university. Families who can't afford the high rents and key money being demanded even for the tin huts near Cola Bridge are camping out in the ruins wherever they can find a roof and fix a door. Two of Chatila's three schools have been reduced to rubble-filled ground floors; the third is being used as a base by

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the Syrians.

Even for those whose homes are habitable, reminders of siege conditions remain. Electricity has not been restored — repairing the network would require maintenance teams and vehicles to enter the camp. Water is more plentiful and cleaner, but still has to be fetched from street taps. Shops have been slow to restock because all supplies must be carried in on foot by women, who shop not only for daily food, but also to replace worn-out clothing, and stockup for possible further siege. It is women who have portered in everything needed by public institutions, from men's boots, to medical supplies and liquid gas containers.

The storeroom of the Red Crescent hospital is stacked with foodstuffs and cleaning materials. Rihab proudly points to a set of large red plastic bins holding grains, flour, preserved meat. All this she has carried in, along with other PRCS workers. Beit Atfal al-Sumud has a room filled high with bags, each marked with a family's name, filled with clothes and shoes for camp children: all brought in by women. Um Ali has been to Corniche al Mazraa (five Kilometers there and back, fasting) to buy shoes for one of her sons; they don't fit, and she has to repeat the walk next day.

With Syrian units posted so close to the camp, Amal militia cannot vent their frustration as they did after earlier ceasefires by lobbing explosives in at night. But they still control the long stretch of road that the women and girls from the camp have to take to reach Sabra vegetable market, school, and jobs. Here there have

been daily incidents, ranging from insults, to brandishing of arms, even to kidnappings. The news that the Syrians have established a new post near Gaza Hospital, where several kidnap attempts have occurred, is greeted with relief. The move was made soon after a Red Crescent worker, Nawal Nunu, was grabbed by militiamen on 2 May. Many camp mothers have kept their children out of school for fear of trouble on this road, or that they will be unable to get back if fighting resumes.

On 12 May, soon after midday, the main alley traversing Chatila from east to west is suddenly filled with people running. "Yistanfaru!" (They are mobilising!) Who? Where? Why? No one knows; there isn't time for explanations. The rush is to get home, or — for the many people visiting the camp — to get out before fighting erupts. Out on the main street, within sight of the Syrian checkpoint, women debate, each obliged to make a quick, agonising decision. Um Abdallah, who is living outside the camp has two school-age children who will soon reach home; she must get back to let them in. She decides to make a dash for it. Other mothers have children who will soon be returning to the camp from schools in Sabra. They wait anxiously.

Beyond the checkpoint the street is full of armed men — it's hard to distinguish Amal from the Syrians. Women can be seen running up towards the market, others down towards the camp. A crowd of Chatila people watch the scene from the side of the barrier, cheering as a lorry load of Syrians appears, chasing Amal into the

side streets. It could be a football match. But inside the camp the youths have been called to action stations. "Back to the barricades!" shouts a passing youth. The crowd grins.

Now women and schoolgirls begin to arrive, recounting their experiences as they ran the Amal gauntlet: *Kalashnikovs* pointed at them in the market; a tank mounted with a machine-gun following behind; indecision whether to stay outside or make a run for it. Suha, a schoolgirl, coming down alone, was too terrified to move until a neighbour took her hand; she arrives pale and trembling. But for some this is an opportunity to show their cool. Iman decides to go out "as a trial," adding to the *kudos* she won last week when an Amal militiaman put his pistol to her head in Sabra, and she didn't flinch.

The cause of the battle alert finally becomes clear when five civilian cars try to leave the camp. Two days ago, they brought in some top Fatah dissidents. Now they want to leave, but local Amal leaders have sworn to fire at them if they do. A few hours later, after "talks," Amal's opposition is swept aside and they leave without a shot being fired. The incident illustrates the current strain in relations between the Syrians and their closest Lebanese ally. One can understand why some Palestinians are taking bets that the two will soon be fighting. But the bet-takers are not among the politicized.

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